

The Sky Men

by Chris000

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Summary: The Elders of the Uralle Clan have noticed strange moving stars in the sky that come to the surface of Mobius. Hestral and his brother Destius are sent to see where the stars land. What these primitive Mobians find will catch them unprepared.

1. Chapter 1: Moving Stars

The Sky Men

>By Chris R. Vennettilli<p>

Chapter 1: Moving Stars

Date: [[est. January 5, 3235, 2314 hours]]

Loc: [[UKN, Mobian Far Northeast]]

The Broken Moon rose over the horizon. The two brothers of the Uralle clan sat by the fire looking at the constellations as they always had. Both of them were wolves that had grey streaks in their otherwise white manes. The two brothers, named Destius and Hestral, had been sent by the elders of the clan to investigate strange moving stars that had been moving in the skies of the night. They were much brighter than the other stars around them, so it caused a bit of a panic at the village.

The Elders didn't want to scare people by saying that they didn't understand this, but it was clear that the Moving Stars were beyond their knowledge.

The Shamans needed young hunters to go forth and seek where the stars were going. Other tribes heard whispers that these strange lights touched Mobius. It was absurdity, but it was worth looking at.

The Brothers had been out for two nights away from the village, heading to the East towards the mountains. The stars seemed to be moving this wayâ€| but it was odd that stars would move in a

direction at all.

The fire crackled. Hestral, the younger brother, stared into the flame, trying to contemplate the orange glow of heat and warmth. His older brother, Destius, watched the stars that were not moving, trying to make sense of those.

Destius could pick out shapes of myth and legend: in the west was Zathura, the Huntress who slew three charging bears with a single bullet. She had her rifle pointed towards the charging beasts represented by three bright stars. To the north was Constantine the Conqueror, a name he heard from traders years ago. Lastly, there was the Galen the Enchanter. According to legend, he was the founder of the Uralle clan, who had magical powers to cure the sick. He was a name prayed to along with Aurora, the Goddess of All.

"Are you going to look into the flames until you burn your eyes, little brother?" Destius asked.

"I like the fire. It's comforting, like my pet dog, Yolgan."

"Yes, but remember this: Yolgan may be comforting for a time, but get too close, and he will bite."

"That is wise advice." Hestral said.

"I try." His brother smiled.

Hestral lay next to his brother and watched the sky with him.

"Destius, why would the stars want to come to Mobius?"

"I'm not sure." The elder wolf said. "Perhaps they like it here!" He smiled for a second, and then said seriously, "I don't know. Nothing makes sense about this. A couple months ago, nothing like this ever happened. The stars didn't move, they didn't shift; they just woke and slept with the movement of the sun and moon."

"Constantine battles well tonight." Hestral remarked, looking at the fierce combatant.

"Yes, the air is clear this evening. We have a good sight for stargazing, wouldn't you agree?"

"Very much so." Hestral agreed. "Destius, I thought the Elders said the stars only appeared small because they are so far away. These ones are small but they look so close."

"Hestral, I don't know!" Destius said. "Goddess Dammit! The Elders told us to go see where they land, and we will do it! I'm a hunter, not a Shaman!"

"Brother, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to!"

Destius got up and paced. He retrieved his rifle and checked the chamber. "I'm sorry. I'm not acting normally. I suppose this whole business with the stars moving and this strange shipment of new rifles from the west."

"You don't have to act that way."

"I know." His brother persisted. "We need some sleep. We shall rise before the sun does so we get a headstart. I think we will both be in a better mood in the morning."

With that, Hestral yawned. He arched his back and flicked his ears. "I agree. The moon is high. Come brother. Lie down and dream."

"Don't forget to check your rifle before sleeping."

"Yes, Mother." He snickered. Hestral grabbed his Hunting Rifle and cycled the bolt. The weapon was emptied of its charges. Then he held the bolt open. "I pray to the Goddess Aurora and her right hand, Zathura to grant me the aim of the Huntress to fell the beasts to grant me honor and bravery!"

Destius finished the prayer, "so we rest for the night, and embrace the visions of Galen. We ask you to watch over us while we dream. We honor you with this."

"We honor you." Hestral whispered. He let go of the bolt with a clack as it closed. "Good night, Brother."

"Good night, Hes."

The brothers closed their eyes and let their thoughts drifted. Galen the Enchanter would give them good dreams tonight. In the morning they would hunt for the stars once more. They would do the Elders proud.

2. Chapter 2: Where the Stars Land

Chapter 2: Where the Stars Land

_The sun was high in the sky as Hestral vaulted over a low ridge, rifle at the ready. He had tracked the beast for close to a mile before this point and he was just about ready to claim his bounty. He hyperventilated, oxygenating his blood, which would allow him to move quicker and catch the prey. _

_ He could see that the footprints left behind in the snow did belong to that of the wild boar. Hestral licked his lips in anticipation of the rich meat that the creature would provide him with. He checked the chamber of his rifle. Good, a charge was set and ready to fire. He would check his aim to make sure that he hit his mark well. Charges did not come easy in the village. Once on top of the hill, he saw the boar out of the corner of his eye. He sprinted after it, now incredibly hungry. _

_ The boar had been trapped on the top of the hill. Ahead of it was a steep dropoff that the animal surely wouldn't survive if it leapt. That only left one direction â€“ back towards the Mobian Hunter. Hestral cornered it and raised his hunting rifle. He made sure to pick a good place to shoot so the animal would die quickly. There was nothing more dishonorable than missing the mark and causing the animal a drawn out death. _

_ He raised the gun and placed it on his shoulder and gazed down the wooden sights. Hestral lined up the barrel with the boar's heart. He

locked the bolt and whispered a Hunter's Prayer:_

_ "Zathura, I call on your strength for this shot!_"

He was about to pull the trigger whenâ€|

"Brother! Brother! Wake up, you dreaming pup!"

* * *

><p>Hestral jerked awake at those words, looking into the sky with a bit of remorse. He thought that he was on a real hunt, a real chance to kill a boar.</p>

"Why did you have to wake me, brother?"

Destius smirked. "Good dream?"

"Excellent dream. I was hunting a wild boar and trapped it. Thanks for waking me up when I was saying the Prayer."

"My apologies." Destius huffed. "I had a good dream as well!"

Hestral cracked his back. "Really? What was it about?"

"Not what, but who."

"Not Elsia?"

"Indeed, Elsia." Destius smiled slyly. "Good dream. Anyway, get up. We've slept in." Destius pointed to the rising sun which was had a brighter shade of blue on the indigo sky. The rays hadn't crossed over the mountains yet.

Hestral glanced into the sky. While some of the stars were starting to disappear, the strange, rapidly moving stars were still quite visible! "Brother, are you seeing this?"

Destius craned his head and squinted. "What the hell is this?" He asked crossly. "Stars fade in the light, and these ones just remain! This is foul magic."

"Magic? Maybe." Hestral replied. "Foul? I'm not sure yet. We're close to the mountains. We find a pass over, and we're one step closer to discovering where these odd stars land."

"Easier said than done." His brother rebutted. "Those are the Uralle Mountains! Very few Hunters have made it over those."

"THE Uralle? _udivitelÊ¹nyÅ_-! I had no idea we were THAT close!"

Destius then seemed annoyed. "You're doing it again!"

"What?"

"The talking! You just spoke in the tongue of the Ancients! That's a sacred speech! You should know better than to just mouth off like that!"

"I'm sorry, Brother, but when I learned it from the Shamans, I expected to use it for something!"

"Well, I'm tired of hearing it all the time. I can't understand it."

"_Poshli vy_. "

Destius scowled, exposing his canines, but he steadied himself. "Pack up. I'll take the lead."

* * *

><p>The brothers set off from their hillside camp into a lush forest below. A mix of pine and deciduous trees covered the floor of the valley. Destius led the charge, vaulting over fallen trees and around rocks. Hestral followed, pushing aside branches to keep up with his brother.</p>

"Do you know where we are?" Hestral called.

"No." Destius replied. "But if I can find a river, we can follow it up to the mountain."

"How can you tell if there's a river nearby?"

"Water tends to usher plants to it. Look for large collections of trees, and by Aurora, keep your ears open. Follow me, and if you hear water, tell me right away!"

"Yes, brother."

The sun was still rising, so a ghostly mist was covering the forest floor. Chirps of waking birds filled the air, but the brothers kept their hands ready in case they needed to draw their rifles. Bears have been known to exist in this forest, and the last thing they wanted was to get eaten. Then they would have failed the Elders. That was the scary part.

Destius' ears darted all over the place, hoping to catch the slightest sound of running water. Hestral did similar. Then, he heard it: a roaring sound. It was small at first but then it grew loud enough for both brothers to hear.

"Destius! Did you hear that?"

"Yes I did! Looks like we've found a waterfall!"

The water rushed over the Uralle Mountains with ferocity and white fury. The liquid splashed over the ground in great force; so much that mist formed around where the water hit the ground. Destius and Hestral ran down to the edge and drank the crystal-clear substance, shivering as the cold fluid went down their throats.

"That's good." Destius growled. "Very good water."

"Aurora herself must have frozen it with her kiss." Hestral added.

"The Goddess is good to us today." He laughed. "Look, we noticed the water before we noticed the bunches of trees."

The brothers drank as much as their bellies could hold, and then they relaxed by the river under a tree. The mist was banished by the sun, which left the forest floor clear. The day dwelling creatures moved about their business as they have since the beginning of time. Hestral followed the waterfall up the rocks and sheer cliff.

"Zathura bless me! Look at the size of this cliff!"

"Yesâ€œ looks like a good three thousand feet."

"Three thousand feet? How can we get up there?"

His brother put a hand on his shoulder. "We'll find the way. You and I will hunt a path. I hope you're good at climbing."

"Thanks."

"Any time."

So, the only way to get over the mountain was to find a pass, but that was easier said than done. The brothers wouldn't dare split up, especially in unexplored country. Unfortunately, there didn't seem to be an easy way up. So it appeared that Destius had jinxed it, much to Hestral's dismay. They climbed up the gentlest rock faces. It was a slow ascent, and a couple of times they almost fell.

By mid-afternoon, they had come to a small pool that was halfway up the mountain. It was here that they rested for a little while. They shared their thoughts of the climb so far. Hestral had cut his hand on a sharper rock. Hestral decided to take a quick shower in the falling water. Destius tossed a rock over the edge of the cliff and counted how long it took to hit the ground. Destius counted ten seconds. Then, he got bored as he was waiting for Hestral to wash behind his ears. Destius took out his rifle and loaded a charge. Locking the bolt, he looked for a suitable target. Then, he saw one. A black bird was circling in warm air currents. This black bird was a pest that destroyed plants at the village.

Destius closed one eye and prepared to fire. He adjusted the barrel ever so slightly to aim just ahead of the bird. He took a second to mutter the Hunter's Prayer, and then Destius pulled the trigger. The bullet sped out of the barrel in the blink of an eye. As soon as he pulled the trigger, the bird fell into the trees, trailing feathers as it fell.

"Perfect." Destius smiled.

The crack of the rifle scared Hestral, who was spending just a little too much time under that water. His brother yipped and jumped.

"_Chto, chert vozâ€¹mi!_"

Destius laughed heartily. "You spend too much time washing. Get dressed, we're climbing again."

* * *

><p>Three hours later, the brothers got over the mountain. After they got a little bit higher, the mountain started to slant gently. They sprinted over it with ease.</p>

"And here I thought we were going to climb much higher!" Hestral said with relief.

"The Elders said that at one time, the mountains were jagged and stretched to the stars."

"Must have been a very exciting time." Hestral said.

The pair was silent as they moved as fast as lightning. After what seemed like hours, the sun started to set. The brothers had no idea how far away they were from home, and they didn't care. Then, Hestral looked into the sky.

"Destius!"

"What!" his brother asked shocked.

"Look into the sky!"

The brothers stopped dead in their tracks. One of the stars had a streak of fire following it. It was a long red smear that stood up against the blue sky.

"Whatâ€¢ is it?"

Hestral shook his head. "I don't know! Is it a comet?"

"No, a comet isn't this closeâ€¢"

"Maybe we should go back. I don't think I like this."

"No no, I'm interested now." Destius said, grabbing his brother's shoulder. "We go onward." Before they could move though, the fire disappeared. Instead of a star, there was a bird.

"It's a bird!" Hestral said in confusion."

Destius' ears twitched. "Not any bird I've seen."

This thing looked just like a bird. It had wings, but it wasn't flapping its wings. It looked green. There were no green birds around here. Then, it made a sound. It was a loud bang that spread through the hills, and it was so sudden that the brothers drew their rifles. It sounded just like a gun going off, but it was coming from this bird!

"Come on! It looks like it's getting closer!" Destius said and set off for the hills about a kilometer ahead of them. This was where the bird was going for sure.

Hestral's mind was swimming. _What sort of bird doesn't flap its wings when it moves? What sort of bird is green? What sort of bird is made of FIRE? Something's very wrong here! Was that birdâ€¢ the star? This bird must have come from the sky! Are theseâ€¢ are these the

Ancients?_

The children of the Uralle were taught that thousands of years ago, the Ancients walked Mobius' surface. They raised monuments and structures that covered the land for as far as the eye could see. They could touch the stars, but then, for some reason, they vanished. Hundreds of years ago, a plague covered the land, and all the Ancients died or fled, but to where? Nobody knew. Hestral's habit of speaking in a different language was one of the last reminders of the Ancients on Mobius.

The brothers cleared the hill, and what they saw shocked them.

Hestral's jaw hit the ground. Before them was a collection of buildings that seemed to resemble a village unlike anything they had ever seen. Buildings larger than there stood in many colors: white, red, brown, grey, and even some olive buildings. The bird that they saw fall from the sky landed on a square in the far corner of the village. Even stranger were carts that were moving in their own without being pushed. It was magic far beyond what the brothers had ever seen in their lives.

Then they saw the people walking to and forth. They didn't look like they belonged here.

"Brother, do you see all this?" Destius asked.

"I do!" Hestral said, starry-eyed. "_Neveroyatno_! Destiusâ€| are these the Ancients?"

The older wolf brother looked at his younger sibling and said "Shut up! You don't just say stuff like that! The Ancients? Really?"

"Really! Destius, listen to me: we've never seen anything like this before! Nobody's village looks like this! A bird fell from the stars on a column of fire! Galen Himself couldn't have given us such a vision!"

Destius couldn't bring himself to believe what his brother was saying. He resolved himself and said, "Let's get closer."

The brothers crept closer to the village. They kept to the trees, making sure they weren't seen. They saw what looked like symbols on the closest building: '2261A33-9'

"What is that?" Destius asked.

"I don't know." The younger wolf said. "Maybe it's a language?"

"Maybe; I know about ten dialects of the other clans in the area. This is something else entirely."

"I know you want to say it's the Ancients." Hestral said with a chuckle.

"I will NOT indulge in your childhood fantasies!" Destius growled.

"Look. There's more writing. See it?"

'AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY BEYOND THIS POINT'

"Yes. More of your Ancient Speech."

"No, something's wrong. This doesn't match anything that I was taught. Thisâ€| this isn't Ancient."

They heard what sounded like bolts cycling. At that point they realized that they had been spotted.

"_FREEZE! GET DOWN ON THE GROUND!_"

The brothers whipped around and saw that a creature in a suit of metal pointed a strange rifle with devices strapped over it.

It was a Sky Man!

* * *

><p>"Put the weapons down and put your hands on your head!"

"Destius, I can't understand him!"

"It's obvious that something's ticking him off."

"_Sergeant! I found them!_" the Sky Man said. Another armored creature came up to the one pointing the gun at them. "_They won't give up their guns._"

"_They're natives! They can't understand us!_" This man made a formation with his hands that resembled holding a rifle, and then they understood.

"I think we may have trespassed. They want our rifles." Hestral concluded.

"They are not getting them." The elder brother said.

"Destiusâ€| they're going to shoot us!"

"Let them! I'm not parting with my tool!"

Then, before his brother's mouth would get them into trouble, Hestral heard something that he was shocked to hear. In the back of a group of armed Sky Men coming to apprehend them, he heard this:

"_Posmotrite na etikh parnyeÄ-!_"

Hestral's eyes went wide. The superior Sky Man looked at the Mobian in curiosity. "_I think he heard something he understood. Whoever said that, say something else!_"

A Sky Man in the back shrugged. "_Uhâ€| OK. YA govoryu chto-nibudÊ¹ drugoe._"

At that point, Hestral blurted out, "_Vy govorite Drevnie?_"

The Sky Men were in shock.

"_Holy shit._"

"Oh great." Destius groaned to himself. "Now he's making conversation."

3. Chapter 3: Communication

Chapter 3: Communication

The Sky Men treated them surprisingly well. Destius and Hestral were allowed to keep their ceremonial rifles while they were escorted through the camp. All the while they were stared at by Sky Men they did not recognize. They were all soâ€¢ different. Hestral's ear twitched as he tried to comprehend just what he was staring at. They seemed too weird, so strange. They were mostly hairless; most of them had a patch of fur on their heads and some had facial hair. Their skin varied in shade as well. Some were white, black, pale, reddish, and yellowish, among others. They didn't even seem similar. Of course, it was a view of an Outsider looking in. Hestral giggled at the irony.

"What?" Destius whispered.

"Nothing. Nothing." Hestral assured. He went back to sizing up the strangers.

How could they tell each other apart? They looked so similar. But then he looked closer. Their eyes, nose, ears, even their hair gave them individuality. It was so striking to Hestral that he was actually in awe about it. Some of them carried rifles with large magazines that must have held way more than 20 rounds. It was soâ€¢ strange. He heard a crackle and jumped. "Hah!" he gasped.

The Ancient speaking one said to him in the Sacred Tongue, "_Don't be afraid, we're just practicing._"

"_Practicing for what? Hunting?_"

"_Not exactlyâ€¢_"

"_Why is there more than one crack? I heard _boom, boom, boom_, one after another._"

"_Our weapons are automaticâ€¢ ermâ€¢ you probably don't know what that means. We don't have to pull back on this every time_. " He tapped the charging handle.

Once again, Hestral was dumbstruck. "_You don't have toâ€¢!_" he turned to his brother, "Des! Did you hear that? You don't have to pull back on the handle! You can fire one charge after another!"

"Yes, yes, little brother! I heard, I heard." Destius said rolling his eyes slightly.

"_Do ALL Sky Men have things like these?_"

The older-looking stranger smiled and said to Hestral, "_We can talk more inside._"

"Inside?" Hestral asked. They were approaching a building that looked like a trapezoid. Strange things were jutting into the sky. A flag whipped in the cold air. Hestral got to his knees and bowed his head.

"_What are you doing?_" The older Sky Man asked.

"_We pray before we enter a foreigner's dwelling_." Hestral said.
"_It's our way of showing we respect others_."

"_Everyone except your brother, huh?_"

Hestral whipped around and saw Destius with arms crossed with a look of defiance on his face. "DES!" He cried out. "Are you crazy?"

"No, Hes. I don't trust them! They come down here, invade our land, and we're supposed to treat them with respect?"

"First off, this isn't our land. We left that two nights ago. Second, they have not said they are better than anybody!"

"_What's wrong?_" the younger stranger asked.

"_He doesn't trust you!_"

"HESTRAL!" Destius barked and shoved him. "Why don't you tell them you wet the bed as well?"

"Fuck off!"

"_He can remain outside if he wants_." The older man said in Ancient.

"_Gladly. _Destius, he says you can stay outside."

"I thought you'd never say so. Go ahead, go and talk with them. I'll stay out here."

* * *

><p>Hestral shook his head and followed the Ancient-speaking Sky Men inside. He felt warmer at once. It was probably a magic of theirs that they could control at will. It was like the Shamans could even learn from these people. They came to a room with seats around a flat piece of wood and metal.</p>

"What's this?"

"This is a table. In our more used language, we call it '_tay-bull'_. "

Hestral imitated, "_Table_."

"Good. Nice pronunciation."

"Have a seat. Take a seat. Whichever metaphor you feel comfortable with. Please, sit down."

Hestral did as he was asked, and felt cushioned by the chairs. He liked it a whole lot. It was a hell of a lot better than rocky ground.

"Would you like water? Wine? Juice?"

"Oh? Just water. That would be fine."

At once, a tiny metal animal raised a cup to him. Hestral reached for his rifle.

"Hold on! It's not going to hurt you." The Sky Man said. The tiny metal animal made a buzz. It only wanted to be useful. Hestral apprehensively grabbed the cup. The metal animal buzzed away, chirping happily. "It's only there to help us."

"What was that?"

"I'll get to that. First, allow me to formally introduce ourselves: My name is Sanchez." He extended a hand. "Major Antonio Sanchez."

Hestral knew this greeting well. He grasped the Sky Man's hand and shook it.

"You know about handshakes! Good!"

"It's the proper way to greet. Were you expecting something else?"

"Perhaps, but that's not a problem. I've told you my name. Who are you?"

"My name is Hestral."

"Just Hestral?"

"Hestral Ugmali'Esshocal:Imo'hoptenka."

"Ahâ€| How about just Hestral?"

"If you'd like." The Mobian said.

"I hope that you aren't taken aback by all of this."

"Iâ€| I am shocked by everything. Birds that catch fire, carts without horses, this isâ€| is it magic?"

"No, Hestral." Sanchez said. "This isn't magic. Maybe to you it may seem like it, but this is only what happens when people put their minds together and overcome their environment."

Hestral looked out of a window to see a metal bird rising into the sky. "Will we have metal birds?"

"Maybe someday. That can be sooner than you think."

"What?"

"I'll get to that in just a moment. Have a drink."

Hestral licked his lips and took a sip. He gasped with delight and surprise. It was colder than he thought. "Bel'she!" He said in his native tongue.

"What does that mean?"

"Oh. I said it was wonderful. You've kept it cold! How do you do this?"

"We can make things colder if we want to. We can even make things warmer. Like this."

He retrieved a black steaming liquid from the metal animal and drank from it. "This is the good stuff." The stranger. "Can I ask you a question: Why do you call us 'Sky Men'?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Hestral said smiling.

"Point taken. Next question: Why do you call Russian Ancient?"

"What?"

"Sorry, that's what this language is called. We're speaking in Russian. It's one of many languages we speak."

Hestral looked a bit confused. "There's more than one Ancient language?"

"There is. I was raised on a world where I spoke a language called English. I suppose you can call that an Ancient language."

"What does that one sound like?"

"This is the language I was taught to speak. It's a widely spoken language."

"It doesn't sound like Ancientâ€| I mean, Russian." Hestral was intrigued by it. He was leaning forward. "Can youâ€| teach it to me?"

"No, I can't, but you can learn it if you want."

"How?"

"This is the real reason why I want to speak to you: we are here to learn more about this planet. It looks very much like the home we came from. I'm not sure if you'll understand."

"No please. What do you mean?"

"Ahâ€| OK, how do I do this. OK. You live on a planet, which is a large mass of land and water, which moves around the sun. Do you understand?"

Hestral nodded. Sanchez' eyebrow arced. "Alright. Now, picture the

exact same world, but in another existence all its own."

Hestral's eyes moved from side to side, trying to compute what the Sky Man was saying. "Like a twin?"

"Exactly. Excellent analogy!"

"What do you call this place?"

"We call it Earth." He said this in English.

"Earth." Hestral repeated. "It sounds strange to me. So you come from this twin world Earth, and you wish to know of this one."

"Correct."

"So, how can we help you?"

"Tell me of your tribe. How long have you been around?"

"I was born twenty winters ago."

"No, I mean your tribe."

That question made him think. He was taught the basic history of his clan. The Uralle had been strong since before his grandfather was born. That was almost a hundred years ago. Only the Shamans knew the full history of the clan, and that was a secret that only they found.

"I don't know." Hestral said.

"Hmmâ€|" Sanchez rubbed his chin. "Have you ever seen places of old; places that seem like they were built before your ancestors? Think Hestral. This is crucial to why we are here."

"Iâ€| I still don't know."

"Hestral, I cannot stress this enough. What if I were to tell you that we have reason to believe that the Ancients, the First Ancients might still be alive?"

Hestral's eyes went wide. "Theâ€| The First Ancients? The Ones who walked the World since time immemorial? Oh, thatâ€| that's blasphemy!"

Sanchez seemed interested. "Why is that blasphemy?"

"Theâ€| Ancients left this world a long time ago. The goddess swept them awayâ€| but I'm not sure whether they committed a blasphemy or ascended. Only the Shamans know."

Sanchez smiled warmly. "If you can tell us more about this land, we can help you gain closure. If you know where the Cities of the Ancients once stood on this world, we can help you figure out what happened to them."

Hestral's heart was beating against his chest. He had never been more excited in his life. He was being given a chance to know what only

the High Shamans did. His curiosity was burning brighter than a fire, but he also knew deep down that by learning the secrets that the Shamans did, he was running the risk of committing a blasphemy. He gave his opinion to the Sky Man.

"I respect your culture's opinions, Hestral," Sanchez said, "but we need a guide. If you're here, you and your brother are scouts. You are the best chance we have to understanding this land. We can sweeten the deal if you wish."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Sorry. Another idiom." Sanchez giggled. "It's a thing I do. What I mean to say is we can make our offer seem more appealing: have you ever wondered about the stars at night?"

The Sky Man was tempting him, and Hestral was wavering.

"What do you know about the stars?"

Hestral's voice was weak, "They are extremely far away. They are like the sun in the sky."

"I'm surprised you know that."

Hestral shrugged and took another drink of the cold water. "It's just what we are taught. I don't think I'll ever see them."

"Would you like to?"

Hestral nearly choked on a chunk of ice. Was thisâ€| stranger offering to take him to the stars? Hestral had so many more questions, so many more things to ask, but his culture was pulling him back, preventing him from being swept away in the knowledge that he was hearing. After he thought about it, he had no reason not to believe the Sky Man. They had birds that could take them into the skyâ€| why shouldn't he believe them?

He was so unsure. He was so tempted, to help people gain knowledge and further his own desiresâ€| it just seemed perfect. He needed more time to think it over though. "Iâ€| I need to sleep on this. I cannot make a decision so easily. Allow me to talk to my brother about this."

Sanchez shrugged. "I fully support that. As a matter of fact, we can extend the invitation to your brother as well as you to stay within our base tonight. We had warm beds, hot meals, and we can offer you no better protection than what we have. You will be safer here than anywhere in the entire country."

Once again, Hestral was tempted. This time though, he rose to leave. The wolf walked towards the door and almost stepped on the metal animal. A thought popped into his mind. "One more thing. What do you truly call yourselves?"

"Sorry?"

"Your real names. I use Sky Men to refer to you, but that can't be your real name. What is the name of your people?"

Sanchez said, "We are the Human race."

"Human." Hestral repeated. "Human." He smiled. "Thank you." He continued outside and let the door close behind him.

4. Chapter 4: A Night in a Strange Place

Chapter 4: A Night in a Strange Place

The sun started to go down slowly, and Hestral viewed the circle of warmth differently this day than before. He had climbed on one of the towers and sat there. A couple of the Sky Men had walked by him and shouted at him in English. He didn't understand them, of course. He hoped that one of them would send for someone that spoke Ancient.

Hestral knew that this language was called Russian. He knew many truths that had been revealed to him in the last, small period of time, but he found himself understanding. He wasn't shocked â€“ at least not greatly, and he wanted to learn more.

"Get down from there! You're going to hurt yourself!" one of the Sky Men shouted from the ground. He didn't have one of those strange rifles. Hestral didn't understand it. He dressed like the others but didn't have a weapon. Was this person a warrior like all the others? He certainly wasn't a shaman. They didn't carry weapons back in the village. He was curious.

"Did you hear me? Get down!"

Hestral tried to communicate with the man. He jumped off the top of the flat tower onto a staircase and walked down onto the earth. He walked past a set of the strange cart tracks in the dirt and met the Sky Man, who was a bit smaller than he was. A bit fatter too.

"What do you want?"

"Can you understand me?"

"Iâ€| I don't understand what you're saying."

"Can you speak Russian?"

The Sky Man shook his head. "I'm sorry, I can't speak Russian. Youâ€| umâ€| want me to find somebody?"

It was slightly amusing to watch the Sky Man make movements as he tried to communicate his meaning. The man stopped as soon as he noticed Hestral's wide grin. Needless to say, neither of the men were any closer to understanding what the other was saying.

"What are you smiling about?"

Again, Hestral didn't know what the man said, but got the impression that he was offended by the grinning. So, he stopped and waved his hand to the Sky Man to signal he was leaving. To his pleasure, he noted the man did the same, "Umâ€| OK. Nice talk." He turned and walked away, shaking his head as he went.

Hestral placed his hands on his hips as he watched the Sky Man go back to his duties. He went to go talk to a friend, as he grabbed his hand and smiled while speaking. Hestral wished that he could learn to speak one of their languages. Maybe English. This way he could at least learn how to say 'hello', 'goodbye' and other polite things and inquire about their ways. Finding someone who spoke Ancient would be fairly difficult in this camp. Finding someone who spoke the Uralle Dialect would be pretty much impossible.

"Speaking with the outlanders, brother?" Hestral heard the familiar voice speak. He turned around to see Destius standing on one of the carts. "I see you've been having fun with the Sky Men."

"I only want to talk." Hestral explained to Destius, who probably wasn't enjoying any second within this camp.

"Don't bother. None of them got close to me. They won't speak to me, why in the world would they wish to speak to you?"

"By the Gods, Destius, you don't want to speak to them either! It shows!"

"Wellâ€| perhaps that's the case." He stepped closer to his brother and took a whiff of the air. "I don't like this place. Something just seems off about it."

"Because we are not used to it." Hestral spoke out. "This is new to us, brother!"

"Foolish little pup! You're still young! You haven't yet learned how to use your instincts and gifts!"

Hestral didn't know how to respond. What Destius said had some wisdom to it, true, but he couldn't shake the feeling that he was just wrong."

Before any of them could respond, another bang filled the air. They grabbed at their rifles with lightning speed and pointed it around. In a second, two large Sky Men with bulging muscles and some sort of rock hide stepped closer to them.

"_Whoa! Stop! Put 'them down!_" These warrior were not armed, but they had a stick on their hip. Did they intend to beat the two?

No. They had calm looks in their eyes and made a motion with their hands. One of them made a fanning motion towards the ground. What did that mean?

The second Sky Man caught this and instead his hands pretend to hold a rifle. He lowered it.

"Oh, he just wants us to lower our guns. There's no danger." Hestral said.

"Or is there?" Destius pointed out. "Look, they watch us from afar."

Hestral looked where his brother indicated. He saw a red light come from one of the far towers. Hestral wasn't sure what the light was, but he was scared by it for some reason.

"_Look above you. It's OK_." The larger of the two pointed to the sky, where the Mobian brothers gazed. Both of their eyes widened.

"Oh look, Destius! There's another one!"

One of the stars was coming to the ground. It had fire trailing from it as if it were lit by the sun. Hestral and Destius realized right away that this was the exact same thing that they saw as before. One of those flying birds that didn't flap their wings. Hestral wanted to stay and watch.

"Destius, don't you want to see this?"

Hestral's brother slung his rifle and just paced. "No. I do not wish to. The day has been long, we've met strange menâ€| I just want to lie down and sleep. Maybe things will make sense in the morning. Hell, maybe this is just a large dream and I'll wake up back in the Village. Maybe then I can focus on going about my life like nothing's changed."

As Destius left, Hestral waved his arm at him, _forget it_. He didn't have time to deal with Hestral's whiny ass today. He turned his attention towards the falling star. He heard a loud projected sound that spoke with the voice of ten men.

"_Attention. Attention. Clear the deck. Transport inbound; cargo teams prepare for unloading at dock 3. Say again, dock 3. Nonessential personnel are to carry on. Beware deflected thrust. That is all_."

The voice had to have had something to do with this falling star. He was sure of it. His legs were starting to get tired from all of this. He wanted to sit down. He just made sure the area around him was clean, folded his legs and sat on the ground. He took his rifle off his back and placed it on his crossed legs. He smiled as he knew he was in for a show.

Sky Men dressed in glowing garments ran around the area. This was where the bird was going to land. He was sure. A symbol was marked on it. At quick glance, the others had different symbols. The one these men were running around had a shape that looked like two half circles joined at their length. There were two before it and one after it. This wasâ€| a name or a number. The Humans had a number system of some sort. Then he paused. He saw the symbols on these places in other parts of the campâ€| yet, they didn't belong. They were different.

Hestral knew: They were numbers. Uralle counted to ten, or _dem_. Maybe the Sky Men did the same thing?

The fire had gone away and he spotted the bird falling from the sky. It seemed dark against the setting sun. He didn't get a good look at it until A few seconds later. It had the shape of a wedge with what looked like wings jutting from the side. Hestral seemed concerned though. It looked like it was falling almost straight down. It didn't flap its wings.

"_Oh Aurora no! It's going to crash!_" He didn't want the bird to

die, but there wasn't much he could do about it except hold his breath and wait.

Hestral's prayers were answered. Again, fire came from the strange bird, but not from its body, but from its strange feet as it slowed down. A few moments later, the bird was hovering in the air. The fire was gone, and it set itself on the ground. The Mobian noted flashing lights all over the bird's body, and letters similar to the others around the camp. It was hard for him not to think that this was some sort of emissary of the gods. He certainly felt as if he should be on his knees worshipping the bird. The strange Sky Men with glowing robes waved fire in their hands. The bird seemed to like this and followed them around until it was satisfied to land. Its knees bent as the metal bird hit the platform where the alien symbol was.

Then its song stopped. It was as still as a rock. At first, Hestral seemed bored. The last light of the sun had sunk below the mountains and the valley was colder. He could see his breath clearly in front of him. He waited a bit longer, but then grew a bit bored with standing still. Just before he got up, a door opened on the bird right underneath its single rounded eye. He held his breath again as he saw more Sky Men! The birds carried people with them? Inside them? Hestral knew what the inside of a bird looked like, but this was nothing like that! The inside was made of rock or iron or something like that. Three more Sky Men walked around the bird joking about something. They were laughing, which made Hestral want to learn English even more.

"_It's something isn't it_?"

Hestral whipped his head around to see who was there. He recognized this Sky Man. His name was Sanchez. Yes, that was his name. He spoke to him in Ancient. In Russian.

"What is this thing?" Hestral asked. "It looks like a bird, but does not move like one."

"That's because it is not a bird, Hestral." Sanchez said. "This is something called a '_shuttle_'"

"_Shuttle_." Hestral repeated after Sanchez.

"Yes. It may look like a bird to you, Hestral, but this is a complex thing called a machine."

"Machine?"

"Now try it in English. _Ma-sheen_"

"_Machine_."

"Excellent. Take a look at what they are doing."

Hestral looked at the shuttle. Parts of it were unloading boxes of goods where the Sky Men were waiting to take it on floating carts. The carts were pulled by more of their strange carriages. There were wooden boxes, metal boxes, boxes with light locking them. Hestral wondered where they all came from. Sanchez seemed to sense the question.

"Some of them come from our ship. Oh yes, it's up there. If you look, you'll see one of the stars moving quicker than the others. As for some of the others, they come from a place far to the west."

"There are more people in the West?"

"Yes. People like you, Hestral, like your brother, and your clan. Most look different, but they are like you."

It sort of amazed him to hear this. He had heard stories about people from across the ocean, and had even heard stories of a war when he was a pup, but to hear it to be true was mind-shattering. "What do the places in the West look like? Are they cities?"

"It's a bit more complicated than that, and I haven't spent much time there. If you choose to take our offer, we can bring you to these places and many more."

"Iâ€œ I appreciate your offer. I really do. I have to think on this though."

"I understand, Hestral. Take your time. I know this is quite a series of revelations." A buzzing noise caught Sanchez' attention. He stopped talking for a second and touched a thing on his arm that was wrapped with leather and had a metal circle in the center. Lights popped from it. Hestral jumped in surprise. Sanchez held a finger up to ask for silence.

"_Sanchez._"

"_Major, our perimeter scans are showing some unusual activity. We're trying to run a diagnostic on the area. We wanted to let you know that this was happening_."

"_I understand, you're following protocol. Do you think it's possible you picked up a herd of animals_?"

"_It's certainly possible, but it looks like the signatures are in some sort of formation. They aren't wolves, elk, or anything like that_."

"_Ok, stay focused. I'll be in the center soon enough._"

"_Major, do you think that there are people out there that we may have disturbed_?"

"_No. It can't be. We made sure when we set up the camp that we were out of reach from local settlements. We're not disturbing anybody, we're keeping our footprint small, and most importantly, we have natural cover from the mountains_."

"_I understand sir. I just can't shake the feeling_."

"_Don't do anything. Just wait for me to get there_."

"_Yes Major._"

Sanchez ended his conversation. The spinning lights and pictures disappeared back into the metal circle.

"What was that about?" Hestral asked. "And what is that?" He was as much interested with the conversation as he was with the metal bracelet.

"That," Sanchez said pointing to his wrist, "is my watch. That conversation is none of your business."

Hestral was confused. This was the first time that Sanchez seemed to show anything than his regular open expression. He seemed upset about something. Hestral wanted to know more, but decided against it. Whatever he spoke of must have been important to the other Humans in this camp.

"Are you in danger?"

"No. No." He shifted his eyes. "I don't think so. If anyone's out there, we can hold our own."

"If it's a rival tribe, I'd like to help."

What would Destius say? He was stepping out to help people he never even heard of? What would the elders say?

Come to think of it, what was Hestral himself thinking about helping the Humans? Despite being a buffoon about it, Destius did indeed have a point about the Humans. Nobody was superficial. There was always something beneath the exterior. What were they after? They had to be here for a reason, and it was knowledge. They knew things about the past.

So he decided on the spot. If he helped them, they would help him back, and allow him to see shrines of the Ancients and their ruined cities.

Sanchez actually gave a slight laugh. "You're serious."

"I'm serious."

The Sky Man had emotions on his face that were not familiar to the Mobian. He had lines on his face that moved when he changed his expressions. His brow was furrowed, but he smiled. "I appreciate your concern. I really didn't expect you to be so forthcoming and willing, but as far as we know there is no problem. It's just problems with our radar."

"What's a _radar_?"

"Forget about that right now. The only thing I want you to worry about is getting a good night sleep. You know what it's like to sleep in a nice bed?"

"I don't know. I've slept on wool and pelts."

Sanchez raised an eyebrow. He pulled out a piece of scrap paper and wrote a symbol on it. "I want you to go to the building with this symbol on it. Find your brother and bring him there as well. You'll find everything you'll need while you're here."

Hestral took the paper and looked at the symbol. It was a rectangle with a puffy square on the top. He scrutinized it and placed it in a

pocket. "Thank you, Sanchez."

The Sky Man actually placed a hand on his shoulder. "Don't worry, son. When you're in my camp, I'll treat you right."

Hestral wandered around the dark camp. A few bright lights shone around. These confused Hestral. They were like fire, yet nowhere near as hot. Some were bright white, some were dull yellow, and some flashed red in the blink of an eye. Along with these, blue walls of light shot up in a frame. When he tried to move through it, it wouldn't let him. An angry looking Human mimed him to move away, which he did.

He was still fascinated with the magic wall. After Sanchez said this, he was sure the Humans had a name for it in their own tongue. Maybe he could learn how it worked. The Humans had these walls of light every now and again in parts of the camp, blocking him. He was slightly annoyed. Noting the futility of it all, he tried to find Destius, wherever he was.

Destius would be somewhere outside the camp. He was much more of a night hunter than Hestral was. The young wolf made his way to the main gate where a Sky Man stood in armor with a small gun to his side.

"Going out?" the man asked in Russian.

"You speak Ancient?"

"Major Sanchez has ordered at least one Russian-speaking guard to be at the gate in case you or those of your clan comes."

"Have you seen my brother?"

"Ahâ€| no. I have not."

"May I go out and look for him?"

The guard shrugged. "I don't see why not. Don't go far. Major Sanchez would prefer you to stay."

Hestral didn't think anything of it. The guard opened the gate. Hestral took a step onto the area outside of the base and looked around. The moon had risen to a fair height by this time. He called out his brother's name in the hopes that he would find him out here.

"Destius! Where are you?"

He waited for a response. There was nothing aside from a few birds crowing in the night. His eyes were well adjusted to the dark. The broken moon lit his path. "Destius!"

"Little brother - up here."

Hestral found himself next to a tall pine tree that rose about forty feet in the air. The young Uralle looked up and saw Destius' eyes shining down at him. "Brother! I'm glad I found you!"

Destius huffed and lowered himself to the ground. "I'm surprised

you're out here."

"We've been offered rooms, Destius! They want us to honor them with being their guests."

"They offered you board?"

"They offered _us_ board."

"I see. I'm not going."

"Oh come ON, Des!" Hestral groaned, tilting his head towards the stars. "What's the worst that can happen? Don't the elders say that when we are offered a place to rest, should we not honor it?"

"That philosophy only applies to those of the Uralle!"

"That's a lie and you know it!" Hestral pointed a finger at his elder brother. "You're so afraid of being somewhere where you are not comfortable that you won't step foot inside of this place. You're so afraid of looking weak!"

Destius bared his teeth and took a step towards Hestral. "Don't. Call. Me. Weak! I am far more powerful than the other Hunters in the valley! I can aspire to be Clan Warchief! But youâ€| oh noâ€| you are willing to become these creatures' lapdogs the very first day you meet them!"

"That's not true!" Hestral barked. "I want to help them so that they'll help us!"

"You mean help YOU!" Destius accused. "You want to go with them! You want to go on whatever that damn thing was!"

"Wellâ€| yes! OK? I want to see what it's like! I want to know about the cities across the sea! I want to see the stars!"

Now, Destius had a look of sadness on his face. "So you're saying this world isn't good enough for you. You want to leave us."

"Destiusâ€| I didn't mean it that way! Desâ€| I just need to know."

"Go." Destius said, refusing to meet his brother's eyes. "Go unearth your ancient secrets. Go find the cities of the ancients. Go across the sea to the west. Hell, go to the GODDAMNED MOON for all I care!" Destius turned around and started to leave.

"Desâ€| where are you going?"

"I'm going home, little brother. I'm going to tell the Elders about this place. I'm going to tell them that heavily armed invaders have entered our lands, and that they may intend to move towards the Uralle."

"But you can't do that! That's a lie!"

"Is it? Look at these men. They aren't Hunters. They're killers!"

"There are men of SCIENCE in there that need protection! They are guards!"

"Guards to you maybe. Killers to me. We'll see what the Elders say. See you, Hes." Destius jogged down the path. "Oh, and I'll be sure to feed Yolgan for you."

With that, Destius melted into the night. The trees were far too thick for even Hestral to see into. Soon, the silence encompassed Hestral. He wasn't going to catch his brother. He was older, stronger, and faster than the young Uralle. He dejectedly walked back to the guard, who let him in upon seeing him.

"Did you find your brother?" He asked in Ancient.

"No." Hestral answered. "He was nowhere to be found."

"Lights out in ten minutes. Better get to your room."

A room. That word was unfamiliar to Hestral, but he was too tired and saddened to argue with the Sky Man. He did show the image that Sanchez drew for him. "Do you know where this is?"

"Those are the rooms. Here's what I want you to do: When you reach the shuttle platforms, head to the left. You'll find a row of identical structures. This number here means '43'. Press the green light and speak your name."

That sounded easy to remember. He thanked the guard and followed his directions. He went to the platforms in the center of the area, and turned left. He spotted people he didn't see before. They were in a large group and wore white garments over other clothing. Some of them had glass in front of their eyes, but they laughed in English.

He wanted to know what they said and why they were laughing. He needed a laugh.

The white coated Sky Men saw Hestral and gave him a wide berth.

"_My word. I've never seen a Mopian like that!_"

"_Why he must be a native._"

"_Excuse me, can you understand us? Can. You. Understand. My. Language?_"

Hestral made eye contact with the Sky Man who spoke this, sighed, and kept on walking.

"_What did I do?_"

"_Oh great job, Alderson. You upset him!_"

He didn't want to speak to anyone. He didn't want to speak to another Sky Man. Who knows how far Destius was ahead of him. But home was at least 2 days away. He would wait until tomorrow to tell Sanchez about his brother telling the clan about the camp. Right now, his bed called him.

The row of identical structures came up exactly as the guard predicted. They had the same symbols he saw on the walls and on the platforms. They were indeed numbers. He followed them down seeing that they repeated, but in greater value. These were strange arrangements. The numbers got bigger but started all over. Strange.

He found it. Number _43_ as the Humans called it. It was shaped like a box, but had strange angles, letters, numbers, and a picture of a bird stretching its wings.

Hestral liked the bird. It reminded him of one of the neighboring clans, the Murmask. They had a bird like this in their banners. He appreciated the clan and appreciated their symbol. Maybe these Humans were like the Murmask. Who knew?

This gate had the green light the guard spoke of. He tapped the button like he was instructed. What was he supposed to do now? Ah yes, speak your name. It made a sound, which Hestral took to as being a signal to start.

"Hestral Ugmali'Esshocal:Imo'hoptenka."

He pulled at the door. There was nothing. It wouldn't open. He growled in anger. He was about to leave, but then remembered that Sanchez couldn't remember his family name. He tried it again. He tapped the button, and waited for the beep.

"Hestral." He said.

Excellent. The machine chirped and the light shone green. He pulled again and the door opened. Hestral stared in awe at the room. It may have been relatively small, it may have been prefabricated, but this room was probably the most amazing thing he had ever seen, and it was all his.

A bed lay in the corner. It was the first thing that Hestral noticed. He touched the mattress and gasped in surprise. It was soft. Very soft. Softer than the bed back home. Then he looked at the rest of his room. On the wall was a metal container. He opened it though and found out it was empty. Maybe he could store something in here. Hestral decided to take his rifle off his shoulder and put it into this container.

"There we go!" Hestral nodded. The container was so big. He could fit the whole rifle inside it! He also took his charges off his belt and placed them alongside the holy weapon. He felt lighter, and felt much more comfortable laying on the bed. The room had a black square in the corner. It didn't do anything. Hestral saw other devices like them around the camp that showed moving pictures. He didn't have the first idea about how to make it work. He didn't have the energy anyway.

He didn't get undressed, he didn't get under the covers, and he just lay there looking at the ceiling. The room was warm despite it being cold outside. More Human magic he assumed.

His last conscious thoughts went to his brother. Even though he thought Destius was totally wrong about the Sky Men, he couldn't help but feel sorry for him and slightly guilty about leaving him to go

back home in the dark, cold night. Destius didn't have the honor of sleeping on this soft-as-a-cloud bed, in this warm room in this magical building. Hestral did feel a bit bad, but the feeling passed as he slipped into a dream.

He flew like a bird up into the sky. He thought he would fall, but he did not. Even though he did not flap his wings he kept on moving. Onwards and upwards Hestral travelled, noticing that the ground was farther away now. He went through the clouds and wondered what would be on the other side. He did not know, but desperately wanted to find out.

Then he was through. The clouds were below him, as well as the mountains. Now the only thing left were the stars that shone against the bright blue sky. Soon he would pass the sun, and then he could be with the stars, the place where he knew he belonged.

End
file.